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## 硕士学位论文

### A Contrastive Study of English-Chinese Syntax and Its Application in E-C Translation

### 英汉句法对比及其在英译中的应用

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## Synopsis

As intercultural communication prevails nowadays, translators are more inclined to do research on the relationship between culture and translation than to language study itself. For Chinese English-learners, it is clear that the understanding of the differences between English and Chinese is the foundation to master English. One of the problems that plague English learners is the difficulty they encounter in translation. Very often it is not because they do not know the differences of cultures between English and Chinese, but because they do not grasp the syntactic differences between these two languages. Therefore, it is quite meaningful and urgent to probe into the differences between these two languages at syntactic level so as to avoid unidiomatic expressions in translation.

Since a sentence is the basic unit expressing a complete thought in communication, contrastive study on syntactic level is indispensable for translation from English to Chinese (E-C translation). This thesis is intended to analyze both microscopically and macroscopically the syntactic differences between English and Chinese so as to help English learners learn more idiomatic expressions. It focuses on the contrastive study of syntactic structures of English and Chinese with the purpose of exploring the similarities and particularly dissimilarities between these two unrelated languages by analyzing abundant examples.

The theoretical basis of this thesis derives from research achievements of scholars in the field of linguistics at home and abroad. Hopefully, the contrastive study will be helpful for English learners to improve their competence and performance in English and to move away the obstacles in E-C translation.

**Key words:** contrastive study; syntax; E-C translation.

## 摘 要

随着跨文化交际的盛行，翻译者更倾向于研究文化与翻译的关系而不是语言本身的研究。对于英语学习者来说，了解英语和汉语这两种语言之间的区别起着基础性的作用。翻译中所遇到的困难是阻碍英语学习者进步的其中一个因素。这些英语学习者并不是没有掌握好文化方面的不同之处，而更多的是因为没有掌握好英汉这两种语言在句法结构上的区别。因此，在翻译过程中，为了使译文更为地道，研究这两种语言在句法结构上的区别就具有一定的意义。

句子是人们交流思想的基本语言单位，因此英汉翻译中离不开英汉句法层面的对比研究。本文通过宏观和微观层面上来分析这两种语言句法结构的异处，从而帮助英语学习者掌握更为地道的表达法。通过大量的例句，本文扣紧英汉这两种语言的句法对比研究进一步探讨这两种语言的异同，尤其是异处。

本文的理论基础来源国内外语言学方面专家的研究成果。笔者希望通过这个对比研究可以帮助英语学习者提高掌握和运用英语的能力，从而克服英汉翻译中的困难。

**关键词：**对比研究；句法；英汉翻译

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## Introduction

A sentence is usually the unit of translation since it is “the primary meaningful stretch” (Robins, 2000: 26). It is the most basic semantic unit for people to communicate. Moreover, the real primary translating activity is finished at sentence level. Therefore, the differences of syntactic structures between English and Chinese are believed to be one of the fundamental reasons for errors or mistakes committed by students in translating from English to Chinese (E-C translation) or vice versa. In the process of English learning, most Chinese students are often puzzled by the differences of syntactic structures between English and Chinese. In E-C sentence translation, many unidiomatic expressions in Chinese appear without being noticed. Students tend to put literally the English idiomatic expressions into Chinese ones, which turns out to be unidiomatic, awkward or erroneous. In order to reduce or avoid such an error and make a translation come nearer to a higher standard, it is necessary for the Chinese English-learners to master the syntactic differences between English and Chinese.

A contrastive study of different languages helps to form a new method, which can be applied in language teaching and translation. The relationship between contrastive study and translation is bidirectional. On one hand, translation may provide data for contrastive study. On the other, contrastive study may provide explanations for some difficulties encountered in translation. By contrastive study, language learners can gain a better insight of peculiarities of English and Chinese, which helps them to be more conscious of the similarities and dissimilarities between these two languages. Therefore, the chance of committing mistakes during translation will be greatly reduced.

Translation, as an activity of reproducing in one language the ideas expressed in another language, has a close relation with syntax. The syntactic structures of a language impose certain restrictions on the way messages may be organized in that language. Therefore, the syntactic differences between the source and target languages often constitute a depressing hurdle to translators. Breakdown of translation may occur as a result of inadequate understanding of syntactic structures in both the source and target language. Therefore, in this thesis, the writer proposes that the syntactic

structures both in English and Chinese be more effectively and accurately used in E-C translation. A careful treatment of the sentence and interrelated meanings of sentential elements and the structure is required for the analysis of English in order to gain the maximal comprehension. Through this way, translator can achieve the appropriate and natural syntactic reconstruction in Chinese without distortion of the original English meaning.

An introduction to the contrastive study on English and Chinese syntactic structures will be offered and this thesis can be divided into five chapters. Chapter 1 presents some theories related to syntax. The definition of syntax and four typical approaches of syntax study are fully demonstrated—traditional approach, structural approach, generative-transformational approach, and functional approach. Chapter 2 deals with the contrastive study of subject and predicate in both English and Chinese. The differences between topic and subject are clearly elaborated, which leads to the conclusion that English is subject-prominent while Chinese is topic-prominent. As for predicate, simple and complex predicate are clearly shown with some examples. Chapter 3 focuses on a much detailed microscopic contrast of English and Chinese syntactic structures—basic sentence patterns, compound sentence, complex sentence, compound complex sentences and Chinese Fujū (复句). Chapter 4 concerns a brief macroscopic contrast of English and Chinese syntactic features—hypotaxis & parataxis, synthetic & analytic, impersonal & personal, static & dynamic, which are the most obvious syntactic differences between these two languages. Some examples are given during the analysis of each feature in order to make it understood easily. Based on the contrastive study of the former parts, Chapter 5 first gives the definition of translation from linguistic perspective, then illustrates the application of contrastive study of syntax in E-C translation through some useful syntactic devices: hypotaxis—parataxis, topic-prominence and conversion of impersonal subject device, translation of the passive, verbal style and inversion, which are closely related to the differences of syntactic structures between English and Chinese. In the end, a conclusion is given. In this part, the writer reemphasizes that the best way to avoid unidiomatic expressions at syntactic level in E-C translation is to be clear about the syntactic differences between these two languages and try to reflect the Chinese syntactic features in the process of translating.

## Chapter 1 Syntax

### 1.1 Definition of syntax

Syntax, coming from ancient Greek with the original meaning of “together” and “arrangement”, is the study of the rules that govern the structures of sentences and determine their relative grammaticality. Syntax in this thesis means the study of how words are combined to form sentences and the rules that govern the formation of sentences. Many scholars give different definitions of syntax with different emphases.

According to Hu Zhuanglin, syntax includes “a complete specification of the primitive symbols that are accepted as the basic vocabulary and the formation rules by which these symbols are combined” (2002: 148). Xiao Liming defines syntax as “a part of grammar that deals with the rules according to which words are connected in the sentences” (2002: 23). He also holds that “by syntax we mean both the rules to form the sentences bases and the rules to enlarge and transform sentences” (ibid: 111). In Peter W. Culicover’s *Syntax*, he agrees that “syntax, which is a description of the various ways in which words of the language may be strung together to form sentences” (1982: 2). Professor Li Yuchen believes we can understand syntax from two aspects. From the original aspect, it is orderly or systemic arrangement of parts or elements. From the modern aspect, it is the facts about, and rules for, ordering and connecting words to form phrases, clauses, or sentences (2004: 5). All of them share the same opinion that syntax is about the rules to guide the combination of words into meaningful phrases and sentences. It is syntax’s task to establish the set of rules that specify which combination of words constitute grammatical strings and which do not.

### 1.2 Four representative approaches to the study of syntax

There are four representative approaches to the study of syntax: traditional approach, structural approach, generative-transformational approach, and functional approach.

#### 1.2.1 Traditional approach

Traditional approach is a model originally for Greek, later adapted for Latin, and subsequently applied to other European languages similar in form to Latin.

Traditionally, a sentence is regarded as a sequence of words. Therefore, the study of sentence formation involves a great deal of the study of words. It sees all languages in terms of Latin categories. It has been dominating the field of language study until the early twentieth century. The traditional grammar laid the foundation of modern linguistics and the modern syntactic study is also greatly indebted to it. The basic syntactic concepts and terminologies we are now still using came from traditional grammar. Traditional grammarians also made many attempts to find ways to establish the relationship between words and phrases of a sentence. One method used to describe the sentence structure is parsing. To parse a sentence means to identify its structural components, that is, to divide the sentence into subject and predicate, and then into subsequent smaller parts, state the part of speech of each word in the sentence, describe the inflectional form of each inflected word and explain the relationship of each word to other relevant words or sentence components.

Traditional grammarians indulged themselves in making rules about how people ought to speak and write in conformity with the standards that they considered primary and greatly ignored how people actually did speak and write. This prescriptive attitude resulted in much of the deficiency of the traditional approach, which has evoked much criticism and eventually led to the rise of many modern linguistic approaches.

### **1.2.2 Structural approach**

Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1916) stated the structural approach in the beginning of the twentieth century and believed that linguistic units were interrelated with rather than isolated from each other in a structure or system. He also identified two principles of syntactic relations: syntagmatic and paradigmatic.

#### **1.2.2.1 Syntagmatic and paradigmatic**

According to Saussure (1916), the most important kind of relation between units in a signifying system is a syntagmatic relation or linear relation, which refers to the sequential arrangement of words in a sentence. Words come out one by one in spoken or written language. Word order, the position of a word in syntagmatic relation, governs meaning. If the words in a syntagmatic structure fail to occur in the fixed order required by the convention of a language, ungrammatical or senseless utterances will be produced.

The second kind of syntactic relation is paradigmatic relation, which was



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